



Toilet-to-tap helps conservation efforts

By Belinda Smith

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In 2001, the San Diego Chapter of Surfrider Foundation sued the city of San Diego over its substandard sewage discharge practices. The city fell short of requirements established by the 1972 Clean Water Act, an unprecedented status for a major U.S. city that still exists. Then and now, Surfrider believes beachgoers and marine life deserve the benefits of these basic water quality standards. But what began as an adversarial conflict has evolved into a positive working relationship with city officials. Since then, water management practices, society, and the environmental movement have realigned.

Environmentalists once fought government at all levels over water pollution as an isolated issue. This resulted in a Band-Aid approach with little change in the systemic practices contributing to pollution. Today, Surfrider's approach is more comprehensive or holistic. One key focus is on the water supply we are wasting by discharging treated wastewater off our coast. The conversation among San Diegans and local elected officials over the potential for recycled wastewater has gradually become less strident and more in line with modern science. Recycling wastewater to drinking standards, once vilified as "toilet-to-tap," is gaining wider acceptance, thanks to rational discussion and public education by water professionals, scientists and responsible politicians. The irony is that San Diegans have already been drinking repurified wastewater by default for many years. Half of our current water supply comes from the Colorado River, which receives treated sewage discharge from more than 200 municipalities before it arrives in our faucets.

A newly released study by the city determined that 63 percent of the public now accepts that Indirect Potable Reuse – the fancy name for toilet-to-tap – will be part of our future water supply. Folks are thinking that if it's good enough for upscale Scottsdale, Arizona or our neighbors in Orange County, then it is good enough for us in San Diego.

In addition, an unprecedented alliance of San Diego environmental, business, labor, economic, development, and ratepayer groups are promoting sensible reuse of wastewater for the region. As a member of the Water Reliability Coalition, San Diego Surfrider has linked arms with organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Labor Council, Biocom and more than 20 other groups interested in seeing the conversion of wastewater to drinking water become a reality.

The incentives to implementing this are compelling. It's not only cheaper than other new water supplies, future costs are dramatically lower compared to imported water sources. It also will decrease our reliance on those unreliable imports and require less energy-use compared to imports or desalination. And if that was not enough, it will result in a healthier ocean ecosystem reducing the health risks to millions of San Diegans using our beaches.

To our credit, San Diegans have been exemplary in doing their part to increase water conservation. The intrepid have been ripping out lawns and tropical plants and replacing them with attractive water-wise natives, which, by the way, attract more birds and butterflies.

One thing San Diegans are still not grasping however is that Southern California's water cycle is drought followed by flood, followed by drought. Such dramatic weather episodes will likely get worse as the climate changes, and this means we need to be more agile in our response to water management. To mitigate flooding, we should capture stormwater in large underground cisterns for later reuse as drinking or irrigation water. We should also demand more permeable paving, so rainwater sinks in and recharges groundwater supplies. This holistic approach would boost water supply, reduce flooding, and decrease polluted runoff entering our oceans. When practices like these are combined with implementing strong conservation measures in times of drought, and implementing IPR for everyday use, then San Diego's water management starts to look like the world-leader we need to be.

In light of the above, and in the face of more acute management of our water issues, Surfrider Foundation asks our city officials and water agencies to not delay implementing Indirect Potable Reuse. We believe our friends and neighbors are ready for it, and as California's second most populated city we have an obligation to do what's right for our future and our beautiful state. Our tourist economy and growing city depend on it. Moreover, in the dry Southwest, eyes from all over the world are on us. Let's show them what the future of water management looks like.

Smith, a volunteer with Surfrider Foundation, is co-chair of Know Your H2O and executive producer, The Cycle of Insanity: The Real Story of Water.

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